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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to describe and conceptualize the view small-town secondary principals have of their role. The method used was indepth interviews, with researchers going to 30 small-town high schools in Michigan and spending some hours with each principal. The accumulated data consisted of 324 single-spaced pages of verbatim narrative in which the subjects reflected on their role. The authors conclude that there are two major norms that constitute the principal's role in these towns: the principal should embody the ethic of a totally responsible public servant, and the principal should monitor the diverse elements of the school to ensure community acceptability and organizational stability. (Author)

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THE ROLE OF THE SECONDARY PRINCIPAL
IN SMALL TOWNS

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to describe and conceptualize the view that small town secondary principals have of their role. For the purposes of this study, a small town is defined as an identifiable political entity of fewer than 15,000 people, one which is not adjacent to a metropolitan area, and which has its own school district with a single secondary school. The thirty subjects were all principals of those single secondary schools and the concern was with the dynamics of their role.

The central concept in this study is that of "role" and as the basis for the conceptual framework, two terms must be defined. The first, naturally, is role:

Roles consist of clusters of norms providing for a division of labor or specialization of function among the members of a group. A person is said to occupy a particular role when, in relation to some special social or task area, the norms applicable to his behavior are different from those applicable to his partner (or in larger groups those applicable to at least some of his colleagues). The organization of norms into roles is to be evaluated in terms of how well the individual is able to reconcile the demands of the different roles he occupies and whether his role-specified behaviors interfere with or frustrate his partner's role performance.¹

And since a role is a "cluster of norms," the second term to be defined is norm:

A norm, then, is an idea in the minds of the members of a group, an idea that can be put in the form of a statement specifying what the members or other men should do, ought to do, are expected to do under given circumstances.²

A role is a cluster of norms, and a norm is a mutually agreed upon expectation that one will behave in a certain way under certain circumstances. The concern was to describe and provide from the description some conceptualized view of the individual norms that constituted the small town principal's role. This question results from the researchers' view that a small town principal has one of the most sensitive and demanding positions among any in education. In small

towns, the high school is frequently the largest and most expensive public building. It is the one element in which all of the area's citizens have a common share and a common interest. To the degree that the area's residents have any communal understandings with shared values and shared perceptions of their diverse roles, these communal elements will be found in the high school. In this age of consolidated schools where the small town district frequently includes students from a number of even more rural areas, it is frequently the high school that gives a semblance of community to a given geographical area. High school athletic contests, musical activities and cultural events are frequently the major source of binding community pride and, similarly, the absence of a winning team or a presentable marching band may be a source of irritation drawing people together to force some change in the school. Plays, graduation ceremonies, holiday programs and other special events are often the only occasions when the people of various classes, occupations and locations come together to share the same activity.

Of course, the high school is also the place where the conflicts in a community can most clearly be seen. Conflicts across generations, family problems, social class differences, varied and diverse expectations that parents have of the school and of their children all show up in the high school. And what criminal activity that takes place in these towns is frequently perpetrated by the adolescents so that, too, shows up in the high school. We do not believe that we are engaging in hyperbole when we say that the high school is the most important communal element and the scene of more conflicting emotions and values than any other locale in a small town.

More abstractly, a small town high school is a complex organization which is extremely susceptible to myriad and varying environmental influences. But,

however open the school is to these influences, the central problem for the school administrators remains; that is, to reduce the uncertainty in that environment and to protect the central core of the organization from disruption.

Complex organizations...(are...) open systems, hence indeterminate and faced with uncertainty, but at the same time as subject to criteria of rationality and hence needing determinateness and certainty ...In practice it would seem the more variables involved, the greater the likelihood of uncertainty, and it would, therefore, be advantageous for an organization subject to criteria of rationality to remove as much uncertainty as possible from its technical core by reducing the number of variables operating on it.³

Following Thompson, one might say a high school principal should conduct himself in such a way as to reduce the number of variables operating on the technical core, and hence the certainty will be increased. But there are two problems associated with that. The first is that the central core of activities in education, the interaction between teacher and students, is a soft, not a hard core technology. There is no definite set of cause-effect relationships with a potentially limited number of variables operating within it. "...the technology of education rests on abstract systems of belief about relationships among teachers, teaching materials and pupils; but learning theories assume the presence of these variables and proceed from that point."⁴ We will not enter into an extended discussion of the issue, but in our opinion there is little in the way of an identifiable technical core in education; therefore, a principal cannot simply "remove the uncertainty from the technical core." In fact, the researchers know of no small town high school that retains educational researchers to attempt finally to isolate the essential components of the teaching/learning process, and there is little indication that it would do much good if he did. The second related problem is that not only is the core technology quite soft and indefinite, but there are numerous variables operating at the fringe of the institution that impinge directly on whatever core there is. The values, beliefs, behavior,

perceptions, and ability of the students, all of which come from outside the school, come directly into the core everyday. In addition, the cross generation problems, the varying expectations of the citizens, the sometimes-resentment by townspeople of the taxes and the school staff, the emotional interests in the sports and music activities, and diverse community values all impinge on the organization and at least potentially effect the core of the school. As Thompson points out, a complex organization is subject to the criteria of rationality and the necessity at least to try to reduce uncertainty in its technical core. But, as we envision it, the administrators of the small town high schools can neither identify the technical core of the school with exactness nor can they reduce the number of potentially disruptive variables operating in and on that organization.

In sum, we conceptualize a small town high school as an open system, complex organization with little demonstrated hard-core technology and subject to many diverse and disruptive forces. But, as in any complex organization, the central problem remains, "to cope with uncertainty" and to work for increased determinateness. The role of the high school principal is essential in this process and, for that reason, it is eminently worthy of study.

METHODOLOGY

The sample consisted of thirty Michigan small town principals, all of whom were known to the researchers. We were not testing hypotheses nor trying to generalize to all small town secondary principals. We were attempting to develop a model which would describe and conceptualize the view that small town secondary principals have of their role. The sampling technique, therefore, was not random but theoretical.

Theoretical sampling is done in order to discover categories and their properties, and to suggest their interrelationships into a theory...Random sampling is not necessary for theoretical sampling, either to discover relationships or to check out its existence in

other groups...The researcher who generates theory need not combine random sampling when setting forth relationships among categories and properties. These relationships are suggested as hypotheses pertinent to direction of relationship, not tested as description of both direction and magnitude.⁵

Of these thirty all but one were men; their ages ranged from twenty-eight to sixty-two, with most of them in their mid-thirties to mid-forties. Of the thirty, twelve had been coaches, six had been science-math teachers, five taught history, two had been guidance counselors, three had been industrial arts teachers, one had taught agriculture, and one had come directly from the ministry. To describe the group further, eighteen had come into their principalships from outside the system, and eight of those had been principals in other districts. It is also of note that these interviews were conducted in 1974 and, in 1977, eighteen of those are still principals in the same districts, five are principals in larger districts, two in smaller districts, two are superintendents, and of three we have no record.

The schools ranged in size from 250 pupils to 1,360 pupils. Of these, eight were 7-12 secondary schools and the remainder were 9-12. Ten of the schools had fewer than 400 pupils, fifteen had from 400-800 pupils, and five had more than 1,000 pupils. Following the consolidation patterns in Michigan, all of the schools contained students from the smaller rural areas.

The specific methodology was that of in-depth interview. One of the researchers went to each of the schools and, after spending some time getting acquainted with the principal and seeing the building, interviewed the principal, asking about his relations with the community, board, superintendent, teachers and students. The protocols of the interviews ranged in length from seven to sixteen single spaced pages, with most being from ten to fourteen pages. The accumulated data consisted of 324 single spaced pages of narrative in which the subjects reflected on the specifics of their roles in their schools.

For the purpose of this study, interviewing seemed to be ideal; and while the researchers are aware of the problems inherent in it, it is our opinion that these could be overcome. These disadvantages are that the technique places total reliance on the subject for validity and veracity and that one is dealing only with words. Indeed, we did not observe to check out the principal's actions against his words, nor did we conduct additional interviews to find other perceptions. And, of course, we did not recheck of the principal's perceptions to check the reliability of his statements. While these are objections, the researchers did have some advantages. We could legitimately present ourselves as empathetic since we knew many of the subjects personally. We were both from a well known department of educational administration in the state, both of us had been school administrators, and one had been a principal in a similar situation. Therefore, there was little reason why the principals should prevaricate with us. After all, we were not hostile parents, suspicious board members, malingering students, or grieving teachers, and, based on the researchers' experience and the literature of field research, if a researcher is empathetic and non-threatening, then the subject will be as honest as he can with the questions. The really serious objection is that we were reliant on the principal's own perception of his role, but we assume that because we had thirty principals and because we were trying to develop our model across these thirty, the effect of any single subject's words would be lessened. Also, the research questions were phrased to ask about the "view the principals have of their roles," not their absolute roles. There probably is no absolute role, and, indeed, their own definitions of their situations are what is important. If we understand that, we may better understand their actions.

RESULTS

The intent was to describe the role and provide some model to conceptualize the role of the high school principal in a small town. The model has to be in abstract terms, but as those terms are systematically introduced, interview data and verbatim quotes will be provided to give those abstractions some substantive content. In developing this model we will distinguish among those elements which are common to all thirty of the subjects, those elements which came from most of the subjects and those elements on which the subjects held mixed views. Thus, we will differentiate among the elements of the model according to degree of certainty one may ascribe to each element. Following Becker, the intent is to develop a model in such a way as to allow the reader to access the data, follow the details of the analysis and subsequently judge for himself the worthiness of the inferences.⁶

There were three role components which virtually all of the principal-subjects expressed. The first of these was that in response to the question, "Can you describe your town?" every one of them said that it was "conservative." Our interest was in gathering some indicants to what might be meant by the term "conservative." "It's conservative; they don't let the girls wear slacks." "They want the school quiet, clean, no trouble." "They don't want to change; they're Catholic and Polish, you know." "If the teachers want to drink, they do it out of town or at the Elks' Club." "There're no zoning laws here." "They want the kids in school." "They're Dutch; they want the kids in school." "It's a German town; they don't want new things." "They want a good program that doesn't conflict with their value system." "Discipline is the prime thing they are interested in." "They are very aware of what is going on in their school building. If I have a kid leave here today and walk downtown, I could very easily get a call from the drugstore asking, 'What are you doing up there; why haven't you got those kids in school?'" "We were going to sing three songs from Jesus Christ, Superstar at one of our sophomore shows, and they felt it was anti-religious and so we took it out of the show." "The school is doing a good job if no one is making waves."

The first point in the analysis is that every one of the subjects viewed himself as operating in what each termed a "conservative community" and, operationalized, that means that each regarded his environment as containing vocal citizens who are wary and suspicious of the school and anything resembling change in the school. "Conservative" means restricting of behavior and the restrictiveness that these principals sense applies not only to students and, to some lesser extent, teachers; it applies most strongly to the principals themselves. The subjects saw themselves as being under constant scrutiny by their community. As they expressed it: "They like to see you at all the school functions." "It's more of an informal thing. Like, I'll be mowing my lawn at home and someone drops over. There is someone in and out of my house all the time, either some kid or some parent calling here in the evening or sometime during the day." "My day starts at 6:30 when I have to call the subs, and, since I'm athletic director, it doesn't end until after whatever event we have that evening." "My family life is about zero; I average three or four nights a week working at school. I'm here from seven in the morning until five and back at night as a rule." "It's a small town and I work here. I live at my home and walk a straight line between those two buildings, and I don't go downtown and into a local bar and dance in the street. You just don't do that and survive in a small town. Parents in this community look at me and say, 'You are everything a person ought to be'; when it comes to their kids, they want someone who walks a pretty straight line." "I've not been in all the bars; I've not been in any of them to drink; I do drink occasionally, but this type of thing, I don't do. At home, the phone calls you get go all the way from the extreme, gross type to work or to the police department at 3:00 in the morning, 'Come on down; the school is open; let's check it out,' or from a parent, 'My son or daughter ran away; can you help us out?' to complaints and obscene phone calls. My family accepts it." "It seems like every night it is something I've got to go to as part of the job or

is part of the community involvement." "I work one hundred and eighty-two days and one hundred and fifty-two evenings." "I have to go uptown and patrol noon time. If the public doesn't see me up there, they question whether I'm doing my job." "I have to more or less guard my flank and defend every move I make as a high school principal." "If I kick a kid off the football team, my job is up for grabs."

Our first point in the analysis is that the subjects view themselves as operating in a restrictive environment where the school is under constant surveillance by communities which are wary and suspicious of change. The second point is that this restrictiveness applies most strongly to the principals themselves. Not only is their school or professional environment restricted, but their personal behavior in and out of school is under constant scrutiny and open to constant criticism. They see themselves as being always on call and susceptible to a variety of demands made by parents, groups, or the community. Yet, no principal considered it odd that he was expected to epitomize the communities' expectations of the school; none found it odd that he had to attend innumerable evening events or that any member of the community could approach him any time of the day or night about his job. Some expressed unhappiness about the conservativeness or the restrictions on personal behavior, but many more volunteered that they were just as conservative as their communities, that they chose to work there, came from similar places, and that they considered themselves lucky to be working in that particular town, and not in Detroit, or another big city.

There is a third and closely related element which all of the subjects expressed. While they accepted the publicness of their lives, almost every one expressed a feeling that they were being asked to take on responsibilities that parents were abdicating. And those who were asking them were the parents themselves. "They want me to tell him to get a haircut." "Now a lot of parents will call and say, 'Gee, they had a beer party; what can be done?' They call the school and want

us to do something about it and this is a big hang up with a lot of people." "I had a call from a mother at 12:45. Her son had come home drunk, and she wanted me to come right over, so I got dressed and went out." "That's one reason we have a dress code; the parents don't want to police the attire of their kids." "The parents have lost control of their kids; they want us to do it." "A lot of times we get a call, and they say, 'Here is a problem; what am I going to do?' It's when they have some kind of crisis with their kids." "A girl who has never done anything wrong in her life falls in love and takes off with some guy, 'What in the world is happening to my life?'" "Some parent comes in the first time he catches his kid drunk and says, 'Hey, what have you people done with my kid?'" "Parents just wash their hands of their kids; they want us to do it."

It is not that the principals resent the demands on their time; what they seem to resent is those demands in which they are being asked to solve parent-adolescent problems which they see as the parents' domain. "I send her kid home for smoking, and she comes in; he isn't a bad kid; he's no trouble; and she comes in and throws up her hands and says, 'I don't know what to do with him; I can't control him.' We have more confidence in her kid than she does." "They love for us to take over and say, 'This is it; don't break the rule.' Before we got rid of the dress code, they would call and say, 'Well I'm glad you told Johnny to get a haircut; I didn't like his hair, but I didn't do anything about it.'" While virtually all of the subjects expressed this resentment at parents who wished them to take over what they see as parental responsibility, some of them reported trying to turn it back. "I told her, 'Why don't you call the house where the beer party is and tell those people you don't want your kid at a beer party?'" "Why don't you tell him to get a haircut?" But none reported that their efforts had resulted in fewer requests of this type.

What evidence we have indicates that the role of the high school principal in a small town is at best difficult. The incumbents view themselves as being in conservative environments with a public wary of change and anything that might contribute to change, as subject to constant scrutiny and heavy time demands and as being asked to accept responsibility for what are essentially parental duties. If one were to stop here, he might conclude that the subjects see themselves in untenable positions.

But, according to the interviews, this was not the case. Those who found their positions untenable did so not because of the elements mentioned, but because superintendents did not support their positions and boards interfered in their jobs. When these conditions were present, the principals reported negative feelings toward their roles; when these conditions were corrected, they reported positive feelings and said they were able to develop secure positions. One must remember that many of the subjects work in buildings where the superintendent also has his office. "His (the superintendent) attitude is very much custodial. If I go to him and just want to talk over a problem, he makes the decision instead of letting me make the decision, and it's just a constant thing of his getting involved in what is my job. A janitor will come in and say something about something happening in a room, and he will immediately say to the janitor, 'I'll take care of that with the teacher.'" "A student will come in and ask me a question, and we may be talking in the office area here, and he will come up and join the conversation and answer the student before I get a chance." "My superintendent came upstairs where most of the high school classes are and walked in the teachers' lounge, and it was ten minutes before classes started in the morning. Here were all my teachers. I wasn't there; I was in my office, and I guess he interrogated the whole lot and asked why they were there. Then he came to see me and asked why they were there. He wanted to change things like that immediately." "He wants to control student discipline for me, do

things that inject his ideas and beliefs and meddle more than I care to put up with, and I was at a point of frustration and ready to leave the district when they changed superintendents." "Unfortunately, his office is right here in the building; at first it was right next door. I would like to see him downtown in the business office. It causes him to interfere in the day-to-day operations, and I don't appreciate it." "He was formerly a principal for about six years. It's still difficult because he would use the high school and my role the same as it was when he was principal and an awful lot of changes have occurred. I'm sure he is still thinking of the high school in the same reference, and it causes difficulties."

We found similar unhappiness with boards of education composed of people who meddled in the affairs of the school, but as many of the subjects related, small town boards are always interested in the school. "Board meetings in small towns are pretty much, 'Hey, did you know so-and-so was late for work?' Every rumor that's going around town you can pick up a board meeting." "If something happens Friday, it's in the Monday meeting." But while all of the subjects described this, the subjects who expressed unhappiness were those whose board members not only talked, but who tried to tell the principal what to do. "I'm still on a honeymoon here and on extremely good relations with the board, but the junior high principal has caught a lot of static. He painted the doors of the old junior high some pretty loud colors and that wasn't taken too well by a couple of members." "The board is concerned with kids in the halls." "The board points out that I had made a bad decision...and they had approved the decision before it was made." "The parents call the school board members and they call me." "The people downtown want the kids off the streets, and they call the board members and they pressure me." These principals were not complaining about being down the chain of command; they were complaining about the superintendent and the board second guessing them on what they considered to be routine decisions that should have been left to them. Some expressed

this as a "communication problem" in which they were unable to make their superiors understand their need for some plainly established policy and some commonly understood chain of command from which to operate.

On the other hand, many more of our interviewees were principals whose superintendents and boards respected their decisions on the running of the school, and these seemed quite satisfied with that relation. "Most weeks I don't even see the guy (superintendent). Then we will have three or four meetings in a couple of days. He and I can talk about business, and there is a good feeling there. My first school district was rotten. I felt like a little reporter and I'd run down and sit across the desk and report to my boss every day on what was happening, and I resented it very strongly." "With the last superintendent, the principal was nothing more than a figurehead in a sense, a clerk or whatever you want to call it. The teachers would go to the superintendent without consulting me, and this is one thing the superintendent should not let happen. With this superintendent before he acts on something, he comes through me." "We've got a good system. He lets me run the school program. I don't think he has ever told me to do something; it rests on my decisions to run the school." "Usually, I make the recommendations and let him know afterwards, and I can't think of anytime he hasn't backed me. He backed me all the way; it's my high school, and I run it." "Basically, it's a question of, 'Here it is; you run it; you make too many mistakes and we'll find someone else.' But he doesn't tell me to do the job and yank the reins constantly." "He is constantly on the go and involved in the community. But he is very supportive of me even if he doesn't agree with me entirely; if I have a sound reason, he supports me."

Similarly, the subjects appreciated those boards of education who did not meddle in the school and who carried their concerns through channels. "I know every board members as a friend and as a person. They feel they can call me and ask to take care of some problem, and I will report on it at the next board meeting. Most

of the contact or questions would be with the superintendent. If the members stepped out of the chain of command, I and all the other principals would discourage it."

"Our board is content not to become involved in the operation of the school. They have faith in the administrators and are happy to accept our recommendations."

"Every once in a while they will encroach on the system and try to tell some teacher what to do, but that's just a problem of communication; we pretty much run our own system. Once in a while a person called a board member and he called the superintendent and he called me, so I took care of it. It is just a matter of keeping them abreast of everything."

In sum, it seems that the principals who were interviewed expressed strong feelings about their need for superintendents and boards who respected their positions as heads of schools and who allowed their decisions to carry official weight. Indeed, if a principal did not have that support for his role, and a few of the people interviewed did not, it is questionable whether he could even create a legitimate role.

The next concern is their role within the school in relation to teachers, students and the curriculum. First and perhaps most universal is a feeling by the principals that teachers ask them to take care of discipline problems that the teachers themselves should handle. "I wish I could get them to handle their problems. I feel half the problems that are sent here could be handled by the teacher. In fact, I have sent a couple back - not the youngster back to the teacher, but I'd drop notes in their boxes and tell them I would like a record of how they tried to handle this because it's their job, not mine." "You have to supportive of staff members, yet staff members at times are so stupid, they back themselves into corners and I tell them, 'Don't back yourself into corners because if you tell that kid the next time he spits on the floor he's going to be out of school, then you'd better be

sure you have the authority to put him out of school.'" "I get the impression that they (the teachers) say, 'Well, I'm not going to take care of it; let the principal take care of it, like discipline; send them all up to him.'" "They want me to take care of their class discipline problems for them."

This is no surprise to anyone familiar with secondary schools. More interesting was the fact that they did not have a view of "a staff." Each of them immediately separated teachers into groups; i.e., the "older faction," the "conservative teachers," the "radicals," the "ones I can count on," the "mercenaries" (those who just drive in for the money), or individuals such as "the drama coach," "the band director," "the football coach," "the science teacher," etc. And they predicated their subjects with accounts of individual or group excellence, mediocrity or recalcitrance. What came through the interviews was a principal's view of the high school as a set of diverse activities run by diverse and isolated people and groups. And the principals described themselves as having to develop equally diverse behaviors to deal with the individual elements.

"There are a few I would say that are somewhat removed from reality. I've got quite a few who have a definite impact; but in the English department, if I could just get to one of them, I could do things with that department." "Well, I work with them in small groups. I very seldom have a school wide faculty meeting; I meet by departments and I try to work with them at the departmental level, those individuals who are really bucking it; I'll call them in and have a private conversation." "I think you have to use diplomacy on some people. I probably have one on my staff that the board, superintendent and everyone knows that the only person who can handle her is me." "Some bought it (a new program), some didn't; it depends on the initiative of the particular teacher. I have to use the word 'professionalism,' but I found my older teachers bought it most easily." "I would say that about 80% of them are fine; 20% bother me sometimes because I think they are teaching for nothing but

the money. One of the things that irritates me is that at 3:00 they are standing at the door ready to run out. You ask them to do anything extra at all, assisting or so on, and a segment of them gets upset." "There's a certain group of people on the bottom of the staff that I would like to replace, but I have to live with these people. I've got one person in agriculture and ag is dying, but every year the system bends over trying to get him a place." "The younger members are usually receptive to new ideas. The older staff members, older in the sense that they have maybe had 8-10 years of experience, have a tendency to be a little more critical and, 'Oh, hell, that's been tried before and here you're going to try the same thing again.'" "I had one person I call practitioner. He shows up at 8:00 every morning and goes home at 4:00 every afternoon, but he still does a good job in the classroom." "More or less you feel your way with each individual. The old timers have their own way of doing things, and if they are getting results even if I don't approve of the method, I see no reason for stopping them." "They are all individuals pretty well; we'll reach maybe a third of them by general contact, a third depending on the issue, maybe even up to half that will just take it. The other will want some individual prodding or individual understanding."

Of course, when the principals had to recognize this kind of diversity on their staffs, they also had to recognize that they were regarded with diverse expectations by staff members. "They see a lot of things that the principal should be, I guess. I'm sure they would feel this person has a great deal to do with curriculum and the organization. They think I should be an evaluator, control the building, control staff and students. If someone is out of line, they think I should step in." "I don't think the good Lord Himself could come down here and make everybody happy. And, of course, I don't come here to win a popularity contest. I didn't come here to be a good Joe and that's part of the price you pay as an administrator."

What emerges is a view of the principal as one who has to develop a variety of methods to approach and deal with a diverse, somewhat isolated and usually tenured staff. Of course, this would seriously limit one's ability to be an "instructional leader," or seriously to effect the extant curriculum of the school. And, indeed, their plans for instructional leadership did follow their approach to the faculty. They spoke in terms of prodding one or another teacher to develop some newer techniques, of providing some special support for a teacher with some ideas, of trying to get one or some to consider an alternative that they had heard of. In two cases, principals did speak of effecting the "overall curriculum," and both of these attempts involved implementing an instructional objective plan. The rest spoke in terms of ironing out wrinkles and potential wrinkles, of keeping themselves informed or trying to update particular teachers or departments. The inference is that the principal may be able to take a leadership position only with the consent and cooperation of the teachers involved. It seems that principals do not "run" schools or "lead" the teachers in those schools. What they do is monitor the diverse elements of the organization. If one or another element is out of line with the others or arouses some community displeasure, or one or another staff member wishes some assistance in something, then the principal exercises his monitoring role. Otherwise he leaves the diverse elements alone.⁷ And as the principals expressed it, while they plainly prefer those teachers who give the school the same type of normative compliance that the principals themselves give, they really have no power to effect those teachers who are reasonably competent and who do not ask the principal for his help.

Finally, there is the matter of the principals' role regarding students. This can be stated quite simply. All of the subjects saw themselves as being intensely interested in students, sorry that they either could not spend more time with them or that most of the time that they did spend was in a disciplinary situation, and as

willing to go to any lengths to assist students in personal ways, especially when it involved bending the system to the individual. Of course, these feelings were accompanied by expressions of frustration when the formal system obstructed what the principal felt was a reasonable way to work out some situation. "I find frustration in being able to explain why they have to do the things they do. For example, we have a board regulation that requires students to be in school seventy days a semester, yet we have two students who didn't have the required days so they are in school today. Now they aren't learning anything, and it's hard to explain to a kid." "You see the bad thing is I see their point of view, and I react exactly the same way. The class dues are money their class earned, and it doesn't belong to the district. 'OK, we will have a beer party.' Well, it's your money, but it's not your money. You can do anything you want with it. 'Good, we will have a beer party.' Well, you can do anything you want, but you can't have a beer party. Now, how can I get through to a bunch of teenagers with that kind of answering?" "So, what we effectively did was to create an unofficial smoking area where the administration never happened to go and neither did the staff." "The board came down hard on me because of smoking going on outside the building, and I simply thanked them for their information and let it go at that." As the principals described it, they found individual ways to help students within and despite the system.

SUMMARY

The task now is to return to the purpose of the study and attempt to answer it more directly. That purpose was to describe and conceptualize the view that small town principals have of their role, and more particularly to isolate those specific norms that constitute that role. While the information was gathered from the principals and not from any other party to a particular norm, the intent of the study was to isolate the way the principals define their own situations, develop their own beliefs and construct their accompanying behaviors.

The data indicated that principals consider themselves to be in a very restrictive environment wherein the school is under constant surveillance by a wary and demanding public, and that wariness applies most strongly to the principals themselves. Their lives in those small towns are almost totally public; they are always on call, susceptible to myriad communal demands and expected literally to embody the highest aspirations that the community holds for its schools. While this is a difficult position, it can be tolerable if the principal's superintendent will respect his decisions and protect him, at least to some degree, from the politics of the school board and the vagaries of the individual board members. Within the school the principal's role is constrained by school policies, teacher tenure and the contract, but most importantly by the diverseness and isolation of the activities constituting the curriculum and the diverseness and isolation of the people who constitute the staff. From the information, we inferred that there really was no overall coordination or plan or underlying rationality to the curriculum. Subjects never spoke in terms of the "goals" or "product," the "planning" or "evaluating," nor did they ever speak of the "staff" or "faculty," and indeed they used no term that would lead one to infer that they were the instrumental leaders of some identifiable unit termed the school. The few changes that they did report that they exerted some influence over were not substantive changes in structure or behavior, but instead they were procedural changes in reporting activities or enrollment processes. The only teachers whom they did effect were either the untenured or incompetent or those who needed and wanted the principal's assistance in some way. While our principals lamented the fact that they were called on too much for discipline, what they were lamenting was that that was the only assistance they were able to provide for most of the staff. They seemed to want a more visible and active curricular role, but they saw the constraints as preventing it.

And, therefore, in response to our initial question about the principals' perceptions of their role and the norms that constitute that role, our conclusion is twofold: first, our principals, because they cannot really reduce the uncertainty of the external environment, conduct themselves as highly dependable and personally responsive public servants who literally embody the community expectations for the school. They try to become sufficiently trusted by the diverse elements of the community so that they can personally absorb the potentially disruptive community influences into their role and "buffer" the organization from environmental uncertainty. Their own role becomes the chief buffering agent which protects the school organization, and the element which spans the boundaries between the school and the community.

The role's other half which is developed in response to the internal organization is one of monitoring the isolated and diverse elements of the school for continuity. This is not done to change the organization nor to reduce uncertainty in whatever teaching-learning core exists, but it is done to assure that the changes that do occur are not those which will upset the predictable patterns of organizational behavior and arouse the hostility of an already suspicious community. Thus, the subjects do not try actually to reduce the uncertainty at the core of the school as much as they try to maintain a controlled form of uncertainty. The conclusion of this study then is that there are two major norms which constitute the principal's role in a small town secondary school: the norm that the person will embody the ethic of a responsible public servant, and the norm that he will monitor the diverse elements of the school for community acceptability and organizational stability. Combined these two norms constitute what we consider to be the major elements of the role of the principal of a secondary school in a small town.

DISCUSSION

There is one element of this paper which troubled the researchers from the beginning, but which was passed over because to recognize it would have entailed too lengthy a discussion. That is in the beginning of this article, the assumption was made that the teaching-learning process had the central place in the technical core of the organization. But the technical core of the secondary school in a small town may not be teaching-learning or student achievement, as much as it is the continuity between the school and the prevailing mores of that community. It may be that what really matters is not academic performance or achievement at all but the trust by the community, however diverse, that their children are not being taught foreign things which will make their behavior different from that which is presently acceptable. If that is the case, and the researchers feel it may be, it would not change the subjects' behavior nor the stated perceptions of their role; but it would make the role that was described much more central to the real technical core of the school. That is, while it was asserted that in the absence of certainty about teaching-learning, the principals left the technical core alone, if continuity is the technical core, then their actions are much more on target.

Moreover, not only would their actions be more on target, but one might conclude that by the principal's "publicness," what he is really doing is literally embodying the school and giving the concept of "school" some public unity. After all, among the conclusions was the suggestion that the school organization has a very low level of existence. The parts are diverse, the technical core is hard to define and the individuals are isolated and give varying degrees of compliance. The role of the principal might be that public symbol which gives all these disparate elements some embodied unity. That idea might better explain the community's high expectations of his behavior.⁸

FOOTNOTES

¹ Thibaut, John W. and Kelley, Harold H. The Social Psychology of Groups. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1959, p. 148.

² Homans, George C. The Human Group. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1950, p. 123.

³ Thompson, James D. Organizations in Action. New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1967, pp. 10-11.

⁴ Thompson, Ibid., p. 19.

⁵ Glaser, Barney G. and Strauss, Anselm L. "Theoretical Sampling," in Normal K. Denzin, editor, Sociological Methods. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970, pp. 105-114.

⁶ Becker, Howard S. "Problems of Inference and Proof in Participant Observation," American Sociological Review, 23, Dec. 1958, pp. 652-660.

⁷ The term "monitor for continuity" is taken from: Wolcott, Harry. The Man in the Principal's Office. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973.